

# Local Authoritarianism as a Threat to Village Democracy: Electoral Manipulation, Patronage, and Local Identity in the Village Head Election in Pucangrejo, Kendal

## *Otoritarianisme Lokal sebagai Ancaman terhadap Demokrasi Desa: Manipulasi Elektoral, Patronase, dan Identitas Lokal dalam Pemilihan Kepala Desa di Pucangrejo, Kendal*

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### Abstract

This study examines the dynamics of local authoritarianism in the 2022 village head election in Pucangrejo, Kendal regency, Central Java, where formally democratic procedures were implemented while substantive democratic practice was distorted. Over 4 months of fieldwork, data were collected through in-depth interviews, participant observation, and document analysis within a qualitative case-study design. Informants included candidates, election committee members, and residents. The results indicate that elite actors exploited electoral rules—particularly the Computer Assisted Test, which produced two conflicting declarations of results—to sideline the leading rival candidate. These practices extended to institutional co-optation, as the election committee cooperated with informal elites, and to patronage networks and development narratives deployed to secure loyal voters. Organized opposition to outsider candidates, reinforced by local identity resistance to incorporation, further entrenched exclusionary political norms. The findings suggest that village-level elections risk subordination to elite control, and they point to the need for third-party monitoring and more robust institutional safeguards to protect grassroots democratic autonomy.

### Keywords

Local Authoritarianism; Village Democracy; Village Head Election; Patronage; Local Identity.

### Abstrak

Penelitian ini mengkaji dinamika otoritarianisme lokal dalam pemilihan kepala desa tahun 2022 di Desa Pucangrejo, Kabupaten Kendal, Jawa Tengah, yang menerapkan prosedur demokrasi formal tetapi menyimpang dari praktik demokrasi substantif. Selama 4 bulan kerja lapangan, data dikumpulkan melalui wawancara mendalam, observasi partisipatif, dan analisis dokumen dalam desain studi kasus kualitatif. Informan mencakup calon kepala desa, anggota panitia pemilihan, dan warga desa. Hasil penelitian menunjukkan bahwa aktor-aktor elite memanfaatkan aturan pemilihan—khususnya Computer Assisted Test, yang menghasilkan dua pengumuman hasil yang saling bertentangan—untuk menyingkirkan calon pesaing terkuat. Praktik ini mencakup kooptasi kelembagaan, ketika panitia pemilihan bekerja sama dengan elite informal, serta jaringan patronase dan narasi keberhasilan pembangunan yang digunakan untuk mengikat pemilih loyal. Penolakan terorganisasi terhadap calon dari luar desa, yang diperkuat oleh resistensi identitas lokal, semakin mengakarkan norma politik yang eksklusif. Temuan ini mengindikasikan bahwa pemilihan di tingkat desa berisiko tersubordinasi oleh kendali elite, sehingga diperlukan pemantauan pihak ketiga dan penjaminan kelembagaan yang lebih kokoh untuk melindungi otonomi demokrasi akar rumput.

### Kata Kunci

Otoritarianisme Lokal; Demokrasi Desa; Pemilihan Kepala Desa; Patronase; Identitas Lokal.



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## 1. Introduction

The decline of Indonesia's democratization over the past decade has drawn significant scholarly attention and has been described variously as democratic regression, democratic decline, or illiberal democracy (Aspinall & Rohman, 2017; Bartels et al., 2023; Feulner, 2024; Keck, 2023; Lobina & Pech, 2024; Smilova, 2025; Tomsa & Bax, 2023; Warburton & Aspinall, 2018). This phenomenon is not unique to Indonesia; it is part of a global trend also evident in major democracies such as the United States, Brazil, and the Philippines, marked by authoritarian resurgence, the politicization of identity, and the rise of right-wing populism. Such developments weaken democratic institutions and erode public trust in political processes. They present a conundrum for Indonesia, which is often lauded as the world's third-largest democracy and is among the most ethnically and religiously diverse countries: internally, they signal a deficit of legitimacy; regionally, they underscore the challenge developing countries face in maintaining robust democratic institutions. Situating Indonesia's democratic backsliding in this global context highlights that its challenges are part of a wider democratic crisis (Mahsun, 2020; Warburton, 2025).

The decline of democracy in Indonesia is driven by the resurgence of state authoritarianism, elites' neglect of human rights, the rise of identity-based populism, and pervasive political corruption. These problems are reinforced by money politics and clientelism, rooted in pragmatic voter behavior and low political literacy (Aspinall & Berenschot, 2019; Yusuf et al., 2024). At the village level, democracy—embodied in the village head election as a form of direct participation—is increasingly distorted by nepotism, elite manipulation, and patronage practices that undermine fairness and accountability (Hermawan & Sundry, 2022; Zainudin et al., 2025). Such dynamics not only weaken local governance but also erode broader democratic stability, as declining public support for democracy coincides with rising acceptance of authoritarian alternatives (Moldavanova et al., 2023). The vulnerability of village democracy to oligarchic power and its lack of transparency signal an urgent need for reforms that strengthen oversight, accountability, and community empowerment in order to restore trust in democratic processes.

Village elections in developing countries often face irregularities that threaten democratic integrity, as shown by Obiagu (2023), who emphasizes the need for independent oversight and transparency to safeguard legitimacy. In Indonesia, village democracy has become a major concern, with studies noting that democratization at the local level has not ensured equal participation, particularly for women (Aspinall & Rohman, 2017). Patronage and clientelism, often channeled through money politics, remain the elites' most reliable devices for winning in the short term while undermining the democratic order (Mahpudin, 2023). Patronage theory explains how transactional relationships between politicians and voters shift loyalties toward personal interests rather than collective values, reinforcing hierarchical structures in which local elites monopolize resources to consolidate power (Fariaty et al., 2023).

Indonesia's local democracy is increasingly vulnerable to stagnation and regression because political interactions at the village level are dominated by transactional clientelism rather than genuine participation. Studies suggest that patronage practices in village head elections undermine public trust and threaten democratic sustainability (Kusmana & Mustofa, 2024), while weak supervision and low community involvement perpetuate the misuse of village funds, reflecting the poor implementation of openness and accountability (Kusnaedi et al., 2025). Village elections, ideally milestones of inclusive participation, often face manipulation and injustice—as seen in Pucangrejo, Kendal, where undemocratic practices and a lack of

accountability obscure the essence of democracy and raise urgent concerns for scholars and democracy advocates (Heryansyah et al., 2021).

Village head elections are complex arenas shaped by money politics, nepotism, and elite manipulation, making them critical to understanding the sustainability of local democracy. Although previous studies emphasize the importance of local political dynamics in democratization, in-depth research on village electoral practice remains limited. This study addresses that gap by analyzing how electoral practices affect political stability and democratic quality in Pucangrejo village, Kendal. The case illustrates how power can be concentrated in a single actor who repeatedly wins through manipulative strategies—first by nominating his wife as a symbolic challenger, and later by employing third parties to block rival candidates—revealing how local authoritarianism undermines fairness, inclusiveness, and trust in village democracy.

The Pucangrejo case illustrates how local elites systematically consolidate power through money politics, nepotism, and the exclusion of rival candidates, reducing the village head election to a procedural exercise that undermines inclusiveness and political freedom (Aspinall & Rohman, 2017). Such practices exemplify democratic backsliding at the village level, where manipulative strategies erode legitimacy and foster public distrust in governance. Addressing these challenges requires comprehensive reforms that strengthen transparency, accountability, and community participation, including independent oversight of elections, political education that empowers citizens, and mechanisms that enable villagers to actively monitor their leaders, so that local democracy remains both competitive and sustainable.

Improving political literacy in village communities is important so that citizens know their rights and can resist money politics and clientelism. If the principles of transparency, participation, and accountability are instilled at the village level, villages will no longer be seen as mere periphery but can become bastions of Indonesian democracy. The purpose of this study is therefore not only to map patterns of manipulation and elite domination in the village head election, but also to formulate policy recommendations for strengthening grassroots democracy through independent supervision, community empowerment, and more responsive local governance.

## 2. Methods

We carried out this research in Pucangrejo village, Pegandon subdistrict, Kendal regency, Central Java, Indonesia, a site selected because of the succession of elite domination in its village head elections. Fieldwork spanned 4 months, from June to September 2024. Because the election under study was held in 2022, we relied chiefly on in-depth interviews to reconstruct the dynamics that unfolded before, during, and after it, examining both the pre- and post-electoral periods; this was complemented by observation of ongoing community activities and analysis of relevant documents, in order to capture, as fully as possible, how power and participation dynamics developed.

To explore the strategies and barriers that candidates face in seeking nomination, we purposively selected 10 informants representing different roles in the election process, spanning both incumbent elites and non-elites: candidates for village head, members of the election committee, and residents affected by the election's outcome. Here, incumbent elites denotes those holding office or positions of power in the village government at the time of the election, and non-elites denotes community members without formal position.

The rationale for this selection was to obtain diverse perspectives—elites and non-elites, actors directly affected by the election results, and those representing

other interests. We applied triangulation as follows: data-source triangulation, comparing interviews, observations, and documents (Computer Assisted Test [CAT] results and the regulations governing the village head election); informant triangulation, cross-checking the narratives of village elites, committee members, and residents to identify contradictions that might indicate manipulation by particular groups or individuals; and methodological triangulation, combining participant observation with document analysis to confirm findings beyond self-reporting. Data were analyzed thematically: interview transcripts, field notes, and documents were coded, and the codes were grouped into the themes presented in the findings. These procedures gave the study adequate data validity and reliability, allowing a relatively detailed understanding of the local authoritarian practices affecting village democracy in Pucangrejo.

### 3. Results and Discussion

#### 3.1. Practices of Local Authoritarianism in the Village Head Election

Local authoritarianism in Pucangrejo rests on elite domination of the village head election. It was demonstrably apparent in regulatory gamesmanship, tactical candidate exclusion, and the pervasive stamp of patronage politics. Such practices indicate how local elites use their power to manipulate the political process for personal gain, regardless of the cost to democratic integrity or inclusiveness. These actions not only delegitimize the electoral process but also diminish trust in local institutions and degrade the very foundation of democratic governance.

One significant manifestation of local authoritarianism in the Pucangrejo village head election was the manipulation of the candidate-screening process. Under [Peraturan Bupati Kendal Nomor 31 Tahun 2022](#) [Regent of Kendal Regulation No. 31 of 2022]—which amends the 2019 implementing regulation for the village head election in Kendal regency—an additional selection (*seleksi tambahan*) is held when more than five prospective candidates meet the administrative requirements; it is administered by an appointed third party and ranked by score to determine the five who advance. In Pucangrejo, this additional selection was conducted as a written test referred to in this study as the Computer Assisted Test (CAT). Although the CAT was intended to ensure objective selection, several informants judged that this very mechanism was manipulated by village elites to secure the incumbent's continuation. According to a committee member, “more registrants were scheduled than would be necessary ... so that, starting from the CAT (the written exam), candidates perceived as opposing the sitting village head could be put out of further contention” (Interview, Committee Member, June 12, 2024). This account suggests how a supposedly neutral regulatory framework can be captured by elites when public oversight is weak and elite legitimacy is strong.

Indications of manipulation grew stronger when the CAT results were announced twice. According to informants, it then emerged that the official record of results (*berita acara*) had not been signed by the rival candidate, and on the following day a revised announcement was issued declaring that he had failed to meet the minimum score threshold—leaving only candidates from the incumbent's network among those who passed. A committee member described the change as “a revision of scores from the regency,” but it was not accompanied by any further official documentation or technical explanation (Interview, Committee Member, June 12, 2024). The two versions of the announcement reinforced the public perception that the CAT was used to secure the incumbent's position rather than as a neutral selection instrument.

The incumbent's dominance was also reinforced by a narrative of development success consistently conveyed by his campaign team. A campaign team member stated, “The village head has helped the residents a lot. The badminton court was

built by him, and the madrasah [Islamic day school] was also built during his term. So, no matter what, the village head must win again” (Interview, Campaign Team Member, June 13, 2024). This narrative not only strengthened social support but also functioned as symbolic pressure that made other candidates feel unworthy or unable to challenge the incumbent’s position.

Such practices close off the field of electoral competition and guarantee that only candidates within the small circle of elite interests can advance. The competitive character of the selection process is lost, and the legitimacy of the winner is called into question, because the result does not fully reflect residents’ preferences free from structural and symbolic pressure.

Patronage politics played an important role in strengthening local authoritarianism in the Pucangrejo village head election. Patron–client relationships were dominant, with village elites—particularly the incumbent and his support networks—capitalizing on residents’ economic dependence to secure political loyalty. Some residents revealed that support for the incumbent was not based solely on political preference but also on established reciprocal relationships. One resident said, “The village head has helped us a great deal. The badminton court was built during his term, and the madrasah was funded by him as well. So if we don’t support him, it feels wrong” (Interview, Resident A, June 29, 2024). A development story dressed up as personal service leaves voters with a sense of moral debt, shrinking the room for political autonomy.

Patronage took the shape not only of public investment but also of jobs, welfare assistance, and administrative help. An elderly resident said, “If you want project work or assistance, you have to go through the village head. You have no option but to follow him again” (Interview, Resident B, August 2, 2024). This dependence produces asymmetric power relations: voters become careful not to offend a patron who can deny them resources. These accounts indicate that clientelistic politics is not merely an electoral strategy but also a mechanism of social control that curbs citizens’ political agency.

This dependence also creates structural barriers for candidates who lack access to economic resources or elite networks. Several village leaders said that candidates without sufficient financial capital are almost certain to be eliminated from the outset—not for lack of capacity, but because they cannot compete with the material support provided by the incumbent. A former prospective candidate reflected this: “If you don’t have money and connections, it’s difficult. It’s not about the program. Residents are already comfortable with the assistance they receive from the current village head” (Interview, Prospective Candidate, August 3, 2024). The principle of equal competition thus becomes irrelevant, as economic disparities and networks determine the structure of the contest.

In addition to patronage, intimidation and coercion reinforced authoritarian tendencies in the election. Pressure came in both direct and indirect forms, from social pressure to “go with the flow” to threats of losing economic access for residents considered to be in opposition. Some residents reported receiving veiled messages that they risked exclusion from village projects or assistance if they voted for candidates other than the incumbent. One informant stated, “Some people say that if you choose someone else, you won’t get a share of the projects. So it’s safer to just go along with the village head” (Interview, Resident C, August 2, 2024).

Intimidation did not always take the form of explicit verbal abuse; it also worked through mechanisms of social exclusion. Residents who showed support for certain candidates reportedly received different treatment in community activities. This created fear and reduced residents’ courage to express their political choices openly. Such intimidation suppresses political opposition while securing the stability of the village elite’s power.

The Pucangrejo village head election is thus a case of local authoritarianism that works not only through leaders but also through institutional co-optation. The election committee and administrative apparatus, which are intended to perform impartial oversight functions, were frequently co-opted by the village elite. A committee informant admitted that “many decisions have to wait for instructions from above, so they cannot be completely independent” (Interview, Committee Member, August 12, 2024). This co-optation influenced crucial decisions such as the verification of candidate eligibility, the interpretation of procedures, and the validation of voting results.

The most striking example was the two announcements of the CAT results, in which a rival candidate initially declared to have passed was then declared to have failed. One resident said, “The first announcement was already out, and two people had passed. After that, there was a new announcement that was detrimental to the rival candidate. They said it was a revision, but there was no letter” (Interview, Resident D, August 2, 2024). The incident reinforced the perception that the committee was not independent but worked in the orbit of the incumbent’s interests, weakening public trust in the election as an institution: residents saw a structural bias affecting the final results.

The influence of local elites did not stop at the election process; it continued into post-election governance. Policies and resource distribution tended to be directed at strengthening support networks. A community leader explained that “development programs are usually directed first to groups that helped the village head. Those who are not supporters are often not involved” (Interview, Community Leader, August 3, 2024). The allocation of projects, community assistance, and access to village programs often operated as political rewards rather than responding to the needs of the community as a whole. This style of governance creates a cycle of dependency that strengthens the elite’s position and excludes groups outside the power network.

These practices deepen socioeconomic inequality, because the benefits of development are concentrated among the elite while other groups remain vulnerable. A resident outside the power network described the situation: “If you’re not one of the village head’s people, it’s difficult to get a share. Whatever suggestions you make are often ignored” (Interview, Resident E, August 3, 2024). This hampers inclusive development and undermines democratic norms of access and equality.

The convergence of institutional manipulation and biased governance has shaped public perceptions of the village head election, feeding skepticism. For many residents, the elections are little more than a formality whose results are decided by quiet elite maneuvering well before voting day. One resident explained, “It’s just for show. We already know who will win from the start. We only take part in the voting” (Interview, Resident F, August 4, 2024). This attitude reflects declining optimism about the effectiveness of participation. Growing apathy is an indicator of the erosion of popular sovereignty, the core of village democracy: when residents feel their voices no longer matter, political participation becomes an empty ritual.

Village democracy cannot function well when the democratic process is distorted in these ways—through attacks on free and fair competition, exclusionary practices that restrict entry into the contest, and an excessive concentration of power within elite networks. Such dynamics not only undermine the integrity of village-level governance but also lay the groundwork for undemocratic practices at higher levels of government. Addressing local authoritarianism is therefore imperative for the sake of democratic principles.

The exclusionary practices observed in Pucangrejo not only suppress political competition but also marginalize certain groups within the community. Women, youth, and economically disadvantaged residents often find themselves excluded from meaningful participation by a combination of systemic barriers and cultural

norms. This exclusion limits the diversity of perspectives in the political process and perpetuates existing social inequalities. As a result, elections do not adequately represent the broader community's needs and aspirations, further entrenching the dominance of elite-backed candidates.

The CAT then became an important tool for eliminating Candidate F. In the first announcement, the results showed that Candidate F had passed the CAT selection along with several other candidates. The second announcement, issued shortly thereafter, showed a drastic change: F was declared ineligible, while the five candidates from the incumbent's network (A, B, C, D, and E) were the only ones declared to have met the score threshold. An informant stated, "The first result was that F passed, but in the second announcement, suddenly he did not pass. There was no official letter, only a statement that there had been a revision" (Interview, Committee Member, August 12, 2024). This sudden change further reinforced the perception that the CAT was used strategically to eliminate the only rival considered a threat to the incumbent's victory.

This manipulation is consistent with the committee's testimony that "many decisions had to wait for instructions from certain parties" (Interview, Committee Member, August 12, 2024). A regulatory framework that was supposed to guarantee meritocracy instead became a tool that could be bent by the local elite. A system that appears objective on the surface is in fact vulnerable to intervention, especially when the committee structure is not independent.

Another crucial consequence is the erosion of public trust in the election as an institution. Residents' skepticism toward the committee and the administrative apparatus deepened after the two CAT announcements. One resident stated that "these elections are just a formality; the results have already been decided" (Interview, Resident C, August 2, 2024). This distrust not only delegitimizes the election results but also weakens the authority of the village administration after the election, because the institution is seen as a tool of the elite rather than a guarantor of electoral justice.

When local electoral institutions are seen as instruments of incumbent power, their capacity to mediate conflict, ease tensions, and maintain social cohesion becomes very limited. Local authoritarianism is therefore evident not only in the election process but also in the structure of public trust, which has been systematically delegitimized. Table 1 presents the chronology of the Pucangrejo village head election process.

**Table 1.** Chronology of the Village Head Election Process in Pucangrejo

| Phase                             | Time                 | Description of Event                                                                                                                                                           |
|-----------------------------------|----------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Candidate registration            | Weeks 1–3            | Eight candidates registered: A, B, C, D, and E (pro-incumbent), as well as F, G, and H (rivals).                                                                               |
| Computer Assisted Test (CAT)      | Week 4               | All eight candidates sat the additional-selection written test (CAT) conducted under Peraturan Bupati Kendal Nomor 31 Tahun 2022 [Regent of Kendal Regulation No. 31 of 2022]. |
| First CAT announcement            | Day 1 after the CAT  | Candidate F passed the selection, creating new dynamics in the competition.                                                                                                    |
| Second CAT announcement (revised) | Day 2                | Candidate F was suddenly declared ineligible. The five pro-incumbent candidates (A–E) were the only ones who passed. No official document explained the revision.              |
| Final candidate selection         | Week 5               | Only A, B, C, D, and E were confirmed as official candidates.                                                                                                                  |
| Campaigning and mobilization      | Weeks 6–7            | Patronage, symbolic pressure, and subtle intimidation began to emerge.                                                                                                         |
| Election day                      | Week 8               | The election took place amid high public skepticism.                                                                                                                           |
| Post-election                     | After the vote count | Village policy was geared toward strengthening the incumbent's support base.                                                                                                   |

Source: Informant. (2025)

The entrenchment of elite dominance in Pucangrejo reveals a feedback loop between power and governance. Once in power, elite-backed leaders use their position to reward supporters and sideline dissenters, enlarging their control ahead of the next election. This cycle not only exacerbates inequalities between candidates but also makes it exceptionally difficult for reform-minded challengers to run against an established leader. Over time, the closed, self-reproducing character of village politics insulates the incumbent network from any real challenge and forecloses renewal.

### 3.2. The Impact of Local Authoritarianism on Village Democracy

Local authoritarianism, as observed in Pucangrejo, has profound implications for the stability and quality of village-level democracy. By undermining principles such as fairness, transparency, and participation, these practices erode the foundations of trust in local governance. The immediate effects are reflected in the legitimacy of elected leaders, declining political participation, and growing polarization within the community. Over time, these dynamics weaken the broader democratic structure and hinder inclusive and sustainable development.

One of the most significant consequences is the erosion of institutional legitimacy. When electoral processes are marred by manipulation—the strategic use of regulatory mechanisms or the exclusion of rival candidates—public trust in the fairness of elections diminishes. In Pucangrejo, citizens expressed skepticism toward the neutrality of the election committee and local authorities, perceiving them as tools of elite control. This distrust undermines the moral authority of elected leaders, whose legitimacy is questioned from the outset.

The erosion of legitimacy extends beyond elected officials to the institutions that govern the electoral process. In Pucangrejo, perceived bias in the administration of the CAT and the pre-registration phase led to widespread doubt about the impartiality of local governance structures. These perceptions reduce institutions' ability to mediate conflicts, implement policies, and foster cooperation within the community, posing a significant challenge to effective governance.

The decline of political participation is another serious consequence. Citizens are less motivated to participate when they see elections as rigged rather than fairly contested. Many households in Pucangrejo have turned apathetic, believing their votes hardly affect the outcome. This disengagement is more pronounced among marginalized groups, who encounter greater barriers to participation and are excluded from decision-making.

Declining participation has far-reaching implications for the democratic health of the village. Active citizen engagement is essential for holding leaders accountable and ensuring that governance reflects community needs. In Pucangrejo, however, elite dominance has created a sense of disempowerment that reduces citizens' willingness to demand transparency or advocate for their rights. This disengagement further consolidates elite control, creating a cycle of exclusion and inequality.

Local authoritarianism also exacerbates social polarization. The exclusion of certain candidates and the strategic manipulation of electoral regulations have deepened divisions between groups: supporters of rival candidates view each other with suspicion, while marginalized groups feel alienated from the political process altogether. This polarization undermines social cohesion, making it more difficult for the community to collaborate on shared goals or resolve conflicts.

The inegalitarian allocation of resources intensifies these divisions and undermines democratic equality. Elites provide goods and services paid for by public funds, but access is reserved for those who display loyalty in electoral politics. Distribution is selective: it solidifies economic inequality and breeds resentment among excluded groups, who come to see the political order as inherently unfair.

These dynamics undermine trust in governance and impede efforts to build a more inclusive and just society.

Combined, these practices erode the village's democratic fabric. Democracy relies on competition, participation, and accountability, and local authoritarianism in Pucangrejo has weakened all three. Rather than serving as mechanisms of community representation, elections have been turned into instruments for staying in power—suppressing dissent, stifling competition, and keeping marginalized groups out. Such a shift undercuts democratic renewal and innovation in the village.

The persistence of local authoritarianism also hinders the development of leadership within the community. In a healthy democracy, elections provide opportunities for new leaders to emerge with fresh perspectives and innovative solutions. In Pucangrejo, however, the monopolization of power has created significant barriers for reform-minded individuals: aspiring leaders are deterred by the high costs of entry and the risks of challenging entrenched interests, resulting in stagnation of political leadership.

Local authoritarianism can also feed democratic backsliding beyond the village level. The Pucangrejo case suggests how localized undemocratic practices may erode national democratic mechanisms by normalizing exclusionary and manipulative methods. It underscores how intimately local and national governance are interconnected in an era of rising local authoritarianism: if democracy is to survive, it must be more than national.

The erosion of democratic principles in Pucangrejo highlights the fragility of village-level governance under local authoritarianism. This fragility is most evident in the way power is consolidated among a small group of elites, effectively sidelining alternative voices. When democracy becomes a tool for reinforcing elite dominance rather than fostering inclusive participation, it loses its core function as a mechanism for collective decision-making. This deviation from democratic ideals weakens governance and perpetuates a cycle of disillusionment and disengagement.

Perhaps the most harmful consequence of this disenchantment is political indifference. Many people in Pucangrejo do not believe the election process is genuine; they regard it as a ceremony in which those who already know the outcome get what they want. Such apathy leaves a void in civic engagement that local elites exploit to deepen their entrenchment. Without active citizen participation, the checks and balances essential to preventing abuses of power simply do not operate.

The decline in engagement affects marginalized groups disproportionately. Women, youth, and economically disadvantaged individuals face additional barriers in an already skewed political landscape. In Pucangrejo, these groups often feel excluded from decision-making, not only because of structural inequalities but also because of cultural norms that privilege elite-dominated governance. Their exclusion further diminishes the diversity and representativeness of local governance, reinforcing systemic inequality.

Polarization, exacerbated by local authoritarianism, further undermines social cohesion. Exclusionary practices have deepened divisions between supporters of rival candidates and marginalized groups, manifesting in mistrust and conflict that impede collaboration on shared goals. These divisions weaken the village's social fabric, leaving it vulnerable to external pressure and internal discord.

Public goods are also unequally distributed, with those aligned with elite-backed candidates gaining preferential access to services and economic opportunities. Such favoritism produces a *de facto* hierarchy in which loyalty to the elite shapes access to development benefits. These practices breed resentment among marginalized constituencies, undermine trust in governance, and sharpen demands for reform—demands that the same structures of power then silence, perpetuating the inequities.

A further critical impact is that decision-making becomes arbitrary in the absence of accountability. In Pucangrejo, leaders who gain power through manipulated elections tend to prioritize their political base over the community as a whole. This style of governance undermines transparency and responsiveness, because leaders face no incentive to act in the public interest; resources are directed toward sustaining elite networks, further alienating the broader community.

Local authoritarianism also hinders efforts to address broader development challenges. In a democratic setting, diverse voices contribute innovative solutions to local problems. In Pucangrejo, the exclusion of reform-minded individuals and marginalized groups narrows policy discussion and decision-making, so that governance becomes reactive rather than proactive, addressing immediate elite concerns rather than long-term community priorities.

The normalization of exclusionary practices poses a significant risk to the village's democratic future. When residents grow accustomed to manipulated elections and elite dominance, they may come to accept these practices as inevitable or even legitimate. This normalization weakens the potential for collective action against undemocratic practices, further entrenching elite power and diminishing the prospects for reform.

In addition, the interconnection between local and national governance amplifies the impact of local authoritarianism. The Pucangrejo case shows how undemocratic practices at the village level can set precedents for wider governance problems: where manipulative tactics and exclusionary practices succeed locally, similar behavior may spread to the regional and national levels, turning democratic backsliding into a systemic pattern. This ripple effect underscores the need to treat local authoritarianism as a serious threat to democracy.

In sum, the impacts of local authoritarianism on democracy in Pucangrejo are far-reaching and multifaceted—from the erosion of institutional legitimacy to declining participation and deepening social division. These practices undermine the inclusivity and accountability that are central to democratic governance. Addressing them requires systemic reforms that empower citizens, enhance transparency, and ensure fair electoral competition. By tackling the roots of local authoritarianism, it is possible to restore trust in governance and rebuild the community's democratic fabric.

### 3.3. Local Identity Resistance in the Dynamics of Village Democracy

Local identity resistance plays an important role in shaping democratic dynamics in Pucangrejo. Because of an entrenched preference for candidates who originate in the village, an unspoken convention holds that no outsider will be seen as competent to lead. Local identity thus works both as social glue and as a limiter of political participation. “Those from outside usually do not understand the customs or character of the residents” (Interview, Community Leader A, August 4, 2024). This view suggests that cultural identity operates as a distinct political asset, often outweighing a candidate's capability or program.

One of the clearest expressions of this identity politics was the rejection of candidates from outside the village during the nomination process. When a resident of a neighboring village was mooted as a contender, some residents firmly rejected his presence. One voter stated, “Why vote for an outsider? We already have our own people. If an outsider becomes village head, many policies will not be in line with the customs here” (Interview, Resident B, August 4, 2024). A member of the nomination committee expressed a similar sentiment: “many residents disagreed from the start because he is not one of us” (Interview, Committee Member, August 5, 2024).

This rejection was not only cultural; it also related to broader sociopolitical concerns. Residents believed that external candidates lacked an understanding of community

norms, values, and priorities, and therefore might bring changes misaligned with local expectations. Local identity thus acted as a sociopolitical gatekeeper, determining who was considered eligible to contest the election. This strong identity preference created structural barriers for outsiders from the outset, regardless of competence or political vision.

As a result, the principles of inclusivity and meritocracy in village democracy are diminished. The preference for local candidates creates an uneven playing field and reinforces exclusive social structures. Although strong cultural ties can strengthen social cohesion, they can also limit leadership diversity and hinder the entry of new ideas into village governance. These findings suggest that local identity, while important for community solidarity, can act as a barrier to a more inclusive and competitive democracy.

The rejection of candidates from outside Pucangrejo did not emerge in a vacuum. It developed from a series of loosely connected events, beginning with seemingly insignificant digital communications that morphed into genuine political mobilization—illustrating how local identity, threat perception, and elite jostling can coalesce into collective action. The episode began with a chat in the Bani Ghozali family WhatsApp group, in which a member jokingly raised the possibility of supporting a relative, Subakir of Gubugsari Village, to contest the Pucangrejo election. Although not intended as a formal political statement, the joke quickly became a topic of widespread discussion among residents.

As the conversation circulated, speculation grew. Many took the exchange as an early sign of political maneuvering by outside actors; others argued that the entry of outsiders would threaten a social order that had existed for generations. Several factors allowed the WhatsApp conversation to spread easily, one of which is that kinship networks in Pucangrejo are relatively strong and dynamic. Within days, the rumor of outsiders running for office had turned into a genuine controversy, and residents began to question what the village officials were really up to.

The name Subakir of Gubugsari was mentioned increasingly often in residents' conversations. Although no official declaration of candidacy had been made, the circulation of the name triggered initial resistance. Residents felt that a candidate from outside the village would not fully understand the values, customs, and social dynamics of Pucangrejo, and some worried that such a candidate could carry political agendas or interests at odds with those of local residents. These concerns transformed digital banter into a serious political matter.

Tensions rose as some villagers suspected that local officials were involved. Residents were angered by the allegation that M. Ihsanudin, a village official, had sought to steer local politics through his role in the WhatsApp exchanges; his actions were widely seen as an improper intrusion by the village apparatus. Village officials are expected to remain neutral in relation to the election, and the matter became even more sensitive amid allegations that officials were clearing a path for outsiders to contest.

Amid growing public unrest, the incumbent's campaign team began holding internal meetings. They felt the need to respond to dynamics that could undermine their support base. The meetings evolved into an internal voting forum, which decided that the team should take active steps to prevent outside candidates from entering the contest. The decision was based not on any evaluation of the candidates' capacities but on political calculation and the recognition that local identity sentiment could be mobilized to strengthen the incumbent's position.

The movement to reject outside candidates was thus adopted as a political strategy. It exploited residents' perception that only local people truly understood the village's needs and conditions. Gradually, the narrative that *wong kene kudu mimpin wong kene* [local people must lead local people] began to spread. The

campaign team then set about organizing the rejection: they contacted community leaders, youth, and religious study groups to convey concerns about the emergence of outside candidates, emphasizing that village leaders must come from social circles well known to residents.

Although the rejection appeared to be a spontaneous expression of residents' wishes, in reality this grassroots movement had been methodically fostered and organized by the campaign team—a transition from spontaneous discontent to organized political mobilization. The unrest peaked on July 6, 2022, when residents staged a protest on the village green, declaring their rejection of any candidate from outside the village. Dozens of residents joined the demonstration, carrying posters and openly voicing their objection. The protest made clear that the local identity issue had become collective: a problem that began in cyberspace gained public visibility through mass action. Table 2 presents media documentation of these events.

**Table 2.** Media Documentation of the Rejection of Outside Candidates

| Documentation                                                                       | Reference                                               | Description                                                                                                                         |
|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
|   | <a href="https://medianasional.id">medianasional.id</a> | Residents demonstrate against candidates from outside the village (July 6, 2022).                                                   |
|  | <a href="https://awall.id">awall.id</a>                 | News report: a WhatsApp group exchange prompts residents to march on the village hall (July 7, 2022).                               |
|  | <a href="https://ayosemarang.com">ayosemarang.com</a>   | News report: village officials' joke about the election triggers residents' protest (July 6, 2022).                                 |
|  | <a href="https://polreskendal.net">polreskendal.net</a> | The Pegandon Police Chief accompanies a public clarification following the peaceful protest by Pucangrejo residents (July 8, 2022). |

Source: Compiled by the authors from online news media. (2022)

It remains unclear exactly who all the demonstrators were, but several community spokespeople at the protest stated that candidates from outside the village were unacceptable. For them, being village head was not simply an administrative role but part of a social and emotional bond with the community. The rejection grew stronger after the demonstration: residents who had not spoken up

before began voicing their feelings, and the narrative that outsiders threatened the village's identity hardened.

Among many residents, the argument took hold that outside candidates would never grasp the intricacies of village issues; for these groups, local identity was a primary condition for preserving village values and policies. At this juncture, the rejection movement became part of a larger public conversation: residents registered their objections individually while increasingly acting as a collective.

The incumbent's camp capitalized on this momentum to consolidate backing. Protectionist sentiment became a tool of political mobilization, particularly to bolster the incumbent's position. As the race heated up, talk of outside challengers kept resurfacing until the official registration deadline arrived on September 29, 2022. Subakir's name did not appear on the list of registered candidates, but the controversy surrounding his rumored involvement continued to strain local political relations.

Residents remain unsure whether the issue of outside candidates is settled. In many people's minds, the rejection movement is being kept alive as a political precaution against similar maneuvers in the future. Identity-based resistance has thus become an increasingly visible part of village political dynamics—not merely a personal matter, but integral to how citizens judge who may lead them.

Residents also framed the rejection as resistance to domination by particular elites: to some, outside candidates represented not only an identity issue but elite interference in the election process. In our analysis, the movement expresses an internal tension in local democracy—it strengthens communal life while weakening inclusion in the political sphere.

The rejection movement shows how residents treat identity as the main parameter of political eligibility, indicating that local democracy remains bounded by unwritten informal rules. The dynamics also show that the space for village democracy can be shaped by perceived threats to social identity: when identity becomes the basis of selection, the political process tends to become exclusive and closed to diversity.

Ultimately, the movement to reject outside candidates is best understood not as a purely spontaneous reaction but as a sociopolitical construct formed through the interaction of rumor, collective perception, and elite strategy. Throughout this process, residents demonstrated that local identity remains a key determinant of a candidate's legitimacy—while the movement also revealed the darker side of identity politics, which can restrict more inclusive participation. Table 3 summarizes the chronology of the movement.

**Table 3.** Chronology of the Movement Rejecting Candidates From Outside the Village

| Time/Stage                                                      | Key Events                                                        | Description                                                                                                                                                                                                                              |
|-----------------------------------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Beginning: before the 2022 village head election                | Jokes in the Bani Ghozali family WhatsApp group                   | In the exchange, M. Ihsanudin invited his extended family (many of whom are not Pucangrejo residents) to take part in the village head election and mentioned the name of Subakir of Gubugsari. The jokes caused unrest among residents. |
| After the WhatsApp conversation spread                          | Residents suspect political maneuvering educational institutions. | Residents believed village officials had maneuvered to involve candidates from outside the village, which they saw as a threat to local control.                                                                                         |
| Residents become aware of the outside-candidate issue (Subakir) | Concerns mount                                                    | Residents believed candidates from outside the village would not understand local culture and values and would bring external political agendas, triggering protectionist sentiment.                                                     |
| Internal meeting of the incumbent's campaign team               | Internal deliberation and voting                                  | The campaign team deliberated and voted on whether to initiate a movement to reject candidates from outside the village. Decision: to start a rejection movement.                                                                        |

|                                                |                                                     |                                                                                                                                                                                                 |
|------------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Before the official announcement of candidates | The rejection movement is organized                 | The movement was not spontaneous; it was organized by the incumbent's campaign team as a political strategy to maintain power by mobilizing local identity sentiment.                           |
| July 6, 2022                                   | Demonstration by Pucangrejo residents               | Residents staged a demonstration rejecting candidates from outside the village, triggered by the WhatsApp conversation and allegations of officials' maneuvering to support outside candidates. |
| After the demonstration                        | Local identity sentiment strengthens                | The rejection was reinforced by the narrative that only native residents were worthy of leading the village; the movement grew even larger after the demonstration.                             |
| Registration stage (September 29, 2022)        | Outside names persist in residents' discussions     | Although Subakir was not on the final list of candidates, the issue of his involvement continued to shape political dynamics among residents.                                                   |
| After the widespread rejection                 | Protests read as resistance to elite manipulation   | Residents rejected what they saw as external political intervention and the dominance of village officials in determining candidates.                                                           |
| Research analysis                              | The movement as an indication of democratic decline | Identity-based rejection narrows the political space and hinders the inclusiveness of village democracy.                                                                                        |

*Source: Compiled by the authors from interviews and observations. (2024)*

Ultimately, this resistance indicates how local identity can become a powerful mechanism of exclusion in village democracy. It confirms that democracy is governed not only by formal rules but also by binding social norms that determine who is considered worthy of leadership.

Such exploitation of identity politics undermines democratic inclusivity and equal opportunity. When external candidates are systematically excluded through narratives of cultural incompatibility, the electoral process becomes increasingly insular. In Pucangrejo, this insularity not only reduces the quality of competition but also diminishes the likelihood of meaningful political reform: as elections are dominated by candidates with pre-existing social capital, the space for innovation and alternative perspectives shrinks, leaving village governance stagnant.

The exclusionary dynamics of local identity politics also hinder the integration of diverse voices in governance. Inclusivity is critical for ensuring that leadership reflects the needs and aspirations of all community members; in Pucangrejo, however, the emphasis on local identity marginalizes individuals and groups outside the dominant cultural framework, reinforcing inequalities and limiting the extent to which governance can address issues such as poverty, education, and social mobility.

Moreover, resistance to external candidates perpetuates myths about the superiority of local leadership. The belief that only locals can govern effectively creates an echo chamber that reinforces traditional practices and hierarchies, stifles critical debate, and discourages innovative approaches to governance. Over time, the village risks isolation from broader regional and national trends, limiting its capacity to adapt to external economic, political, and social shifts.

One potential avenue for easing the tension between local identity and inclusivity is community-based dialogue and education. Efforts to raise awareness of the value of diverse leadership could help challenge exclusionary attitudes and broaden the pool of potential candidates. By fostering discussion of governance priorities and the qualifications required for effective leadership, such initiatives could encourage voters to evaluate candidates on capability rather than origin.

### 3.4. Implications of the Findings for Theory and Policy

The Pucangrejo case carries critical implications for both theoretical perspectives on local democracy and practical policy. The dynamics of local authoritarianism, identity politics, and elite domination challenge established assumptions about decentralization and its potential to strengthen democracy: instead of fostering inclusivity and accountability, decentralization in this context has enabled the consolidation of elite power, raising important questions about the conditions under which decentralization delivers its intended democratic outcomes.

Theoretically, the study underscores the limits of decentralization as a universally positive mechanism of democratization. Classic accounts, such as that of [Rondinelli \(1981\)](#), emphasize decentralization's potential to enhance local participation, improve governance, and empower communities. The findings from Pucangrejo indicate, however, that decentralization can also create opportunities for symbolic dominance, in which local power holders manipulate democratic mechanisms for personal or group interests. This nuance calls for a re-evaluation of the conditions necessary for decentralization to function as a democratizing force.

The case also contributes to the discourse on local authoritarianism by showing how democratic processes can be subverted at the grassroots. Scholars such as [Hao \(2023\)](#) argue that authoritarianism often coexists with democratic institutions, using them to legitimize undemocratic practices. In Pucangrejo, local elites adopted a similar approach, leveraging ostensibly democratic mechanisms—elections and regulatory frameworks—to entrench their dominance. This finding highlights the need for theories that account for the dualistic character of democratic institutions in hybrid governance settings.

Another theoretical implication concerns the intersection of identity politics and democracy. The resistance to external candidates illustrates how local identities shape political preferences and behavior, often at the expense of meritocracy and inclusivity. This resonates with [Anderson's \(1983/2006\)](#) concept of imagined communities, in which shared identities foster belonging but can also exclude those perceived as outsiders. The findings suggest that theories of democracy must better account for the role of identity in political dynamics, particularly in culturally homogeneous or tightly knit communities.

On the policy front, the findings emphasize the importance of regulatory design that minimizes opportunities for manipulation. The strategic misuse of the CAT reveals vulnerabilities in the current regulatory structure that local elites can exploit. Policymakers should consider stricter oversight mechanisms, such as independent monitoring bodies, to protect the integrity of electoral processes, together with greater transparency in candidate selection and evaluation criteria.

The study also underscores the need for capacity building in local governance institutions. The co-optation of the election committee undermined public trust; training programs for committee members, coupled with clear guidelines on their roles and responsibilities, could enhance their ability to act independently and impartially—measures essential to restoring confidence in the fairness of local governance.

Empowering marginalized groups is another key recommendation. Women, youth, and economically disadvantaged residents face significant barriers to political participation. Targeted initiatives—leadership training, voter education campaigns, and mentorship—could help these groups overcome structural and cultural obstacles, broadening the base of participation and contributing to a more inclusive and representative democratic system.

At a broader level, the findings point to the need for an integrated approach to local authoritarianism. Decentralization must be accompanied by complementary

reforms that ensure accountability and inclusivity: policies that encourage civic engagement, promote transparency, and support independent media can create an enabling environment for democratic renewal.

The interconnectedness of local and national governance reinforces the importance of treating local authoritarianism as part of broader democratic reform. In Pucangrejo, the alignment between local elites and higher-level political actors illustrates how power dynamics at different levels of governance can reinforce one another. National policymakers should prioritize interventions that promote accountability at the local level, as these efforts are essential to safeguarding democratic principles across all tiers of government.

#### 4. Conclusion

This study indicates that the village head election in Pucangrejo did not unfold as an open political competition but as an arena in which local elites systematically consolidated power through regulatory manipulation, institutional co-optation, patronage, and the mobilization of local identity. The selective use of the Computer Assisted Test—including the emergence of two versions of the results announcement, to the detriment of the rival candidate—illustrates how a legal framework can be subverted to maintain incumbent dominance. This process was reinforced by the co-optation of an election committee that awaited instructions from the elite, administrative barriers against particular candidates, and the stacking of pro-incumbent candidates intended to eliminate key competitors.

This study has several limitations. First, the depth of analysis depends on interview data from informants directly involved in the election process, which may be influenced by perceptual bias or political affiliation. Second, the study is limited to a single village, so the findings cannot be directly generalized to Kendal regency as a whole or to the national context. Third, limited access to official documents—especially those related to the Computer Assisted Test evaluation process—meant that the analysis relied on triangulating informant narratives and field observations.

Future research should undertake comparative studies across villages to examine variation in manipulation practices and identity resistance in different village head elections. Multi-site research would provide a stronger understanding of both general patterns and local particularities in the regression of village democracy. It is also important to broaden data sources—including administrative documents and digital records of local actors' communications—to trace how information, rumor, and political mobilization develop in the village public sphere. In this way, the village head election can again become a democratic mechanism that genuinely reflects citizens' aspirations, rather than an arena for the consolidation of elite power.

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